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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 16 September 1981

OPENING UP TO NATURE

Staying within the confines of your own home gives you a sense of largeness, since you feel the master inside your small space. But when you go out into the open expanse of nature, then you feel very small and it seems as if the sky and the earth form one big universal house. On the other hand, if there are many people living in your home with you, that sense of the house being your own place begins to disappear and you become just one among many. However, if you go outside to a great open space you would feel that all of nature is yours, and even though there may be many people there you would not feel outnumbered by or separated from them. Therefore, after a period of staying indoors, people should take the opportunity to get outside and experience, on the one hand, the smallness of themselves, and on the other, the largeness of themselves. In reality, there is no large or small. The feeling of large or small is just due to the variations of environment.

A famous practitioner in the T'ang Dynasty said in a poem: The clouds are my blanket, the mountain rocks are my pillow, and the earth is my bed. Because of his spacious attitude, he did not feel that anything in the world was not his. Neither did he feel that anything in the world was his possession; after all, clouds, earth, and rocks can be found anywhere. This kind of person is very free and easy with no vexations.

Since most people might feel a bit lonely coming out into nature by themselves, they tend to go out together in groups. But usually they just transplant their own little world out into the big world, and a sense of separation is still maintained: I'm with these people, not with those. We shouldn't be like a snail who always carries its house on its back wherever it goes and jumps back into it to hide whenever it comes in contact with another animal. It is better to develop an attitude of non-distinction with regard to everybody in the environment with you, whether or not you are acquainted with them, and also an intimacy with the other living beings around you, the birds and butterflies. Just like the stream of smoke leaving a chimney disperses and spreads out once it hits the atmosphere, we should disperse our sense of "group" or "family" and truly participate in the life around us.

If we come out here with people we know, and all we do is sit around and talk about the same things we always talk about when we see these people, this is totally meaningless. We may as well have stayed at home. Coming out should be a process

of opening up, putting down all everyday talk, subjective mental activity, judging and discrimination, and letting your mind objectively observe the natural environment.

In the East, starting from the time of the Buddha, it was almost always the custom for those who have left the home life to spend a period of time practicing in the mountains. Generally the hut they lived in was very simply constructed so that it could be put up and dismantled very quickly and the person could move on to another place. The reason for this was to develop a kind of lifestyle that wasn't limited to a particular social sphere, which would foster a kind of group mentality, but rather to encourage a more holistic consciousness where one would feel at one with all life on earth and the whole universe. Originally Sakyamuni Buddha didn't set out to form a defined group or stick to any one place, because this tends to give rise to exclusivistic thinking, or distinguishing between inside and outside, big and small, yours and mine.

So we should take full advantage of the opportunity to experience the greatness of nature and the smallness of ourselves. And yet if you can truly open up to the experience of nature, and nature accepts you, then you are as large as nature itself. When we first arrived at this spot, one little boy said that he was afraid to walk around outside because of all the gypsy moths crawling on the ground. They do have a rather strange and scary look about them, being all furry and everything, and they eat the leaves off the trees. But when you think about it, human beings are nothing but big bugs themselves. We are also hairy and eat vegetation, only it's made into sandwiches etc. People tend to see themselves as very great or exceptional in relation to other people, and also in relation to the rest of nature, people feel that they are the crown of creation and everything else is relatively useless. This attitude derives from the ability of human beings to reason and acquire knowledge. But actually, if we look at it from the point of view of nature, there's really no great, no small, no intelligence or stupidity.

In the Amitabha Sutra it says that in the land of Amitabha Buddha, the grass and trees are all very pure and majestic and the blowing of the wind and the chirping of the birds are all speaking Buddha Dharma. If a person is able to open their mind and get rid of their self-centered mentality and just think of themselves as a part of nature, then with this mind of equality, when you hear the sound of the wind blowing or birds singing, you would hear Buddha Dharma. If the mind is pure and equal there is no place that is not the Pure Land.

(Informal Talk spoken by Master Sheng-Yen during a picnic at Silvermine Lake,
June 21, 1981)

NEWS ITEMS

Shih-fu Sheng-Yen will be returning to New York on Oct. 22. The following Dharma teachings and meditation activities are scheduled during his three months stay here:

Beginners Meditation Workshop. The Beginners Class (originally 4 sessions) has been compressed into an intensive workshop of 2 sessions to meet on alternate Saturdays, beginning Oct. 24, from 3-9 P.M. (with an hour break from 5:30-6:30)

Course on the Consciousness-Only School of Indian Buddhism. Monday evenings, 7:30-9:30 for 8 weeks, beginning Oct. 26, at the Ch'an Center.

Introduction to Ch'an. At St. John's Univ. Saturday mornings 9-12 A.M., for 6 weeks, beginning Nov. 7. (register through the school of Continuing Education, 990-6101)

Intensive 7-day Ch'an Retreats. From Wed. eve. Nov. 25 to Dec. 2., and from Fri. eve. Dec. 25 to Jan. 1.

For further information on these activities and other Ch'an Center events, contact the Center at 592-6593.

On Sunday, Sept. 13, the Ch'an Center went for an outing at the Jaques Marchais Center of Tibetan Art on Staten Island, where a special lecture was prepared for us, after which we picnicked on the grounds.

On Sept. 6, the Ch'an Center was visited by five distinguished Bhiksus: Yin-Hai Fa-Shih, abbot of Dharma Seal Temple in Monterey Park, Ca., Ching-Hai Fa-Shih, abbot of Buddha Light Temple in Houston Texas, Fa-Yün Fa-Shih, abbot of Grace Gratitude Temple in New York, Ao-Ling Fa-Shih, abbot of Eastern Dhyana Temple, and Huan-Sheng Fa-Shih, Buddhist scholar of Tun-huang texts.

Renowned Buddhist scholar, Dr. Alex Wayman, Professor of Sanskrit and Buddhist Studies at Columbia University, will lecture at the Ch'an Center on Sunday, Oct. 4 at 1 P.M. on the Buddhist Attitude Towards Death.

Hatha Yoga classes (of 5 sessions) taught by Shakti are still being offered on Tuesday evenings at the Center. Next class starts Oct. 13.

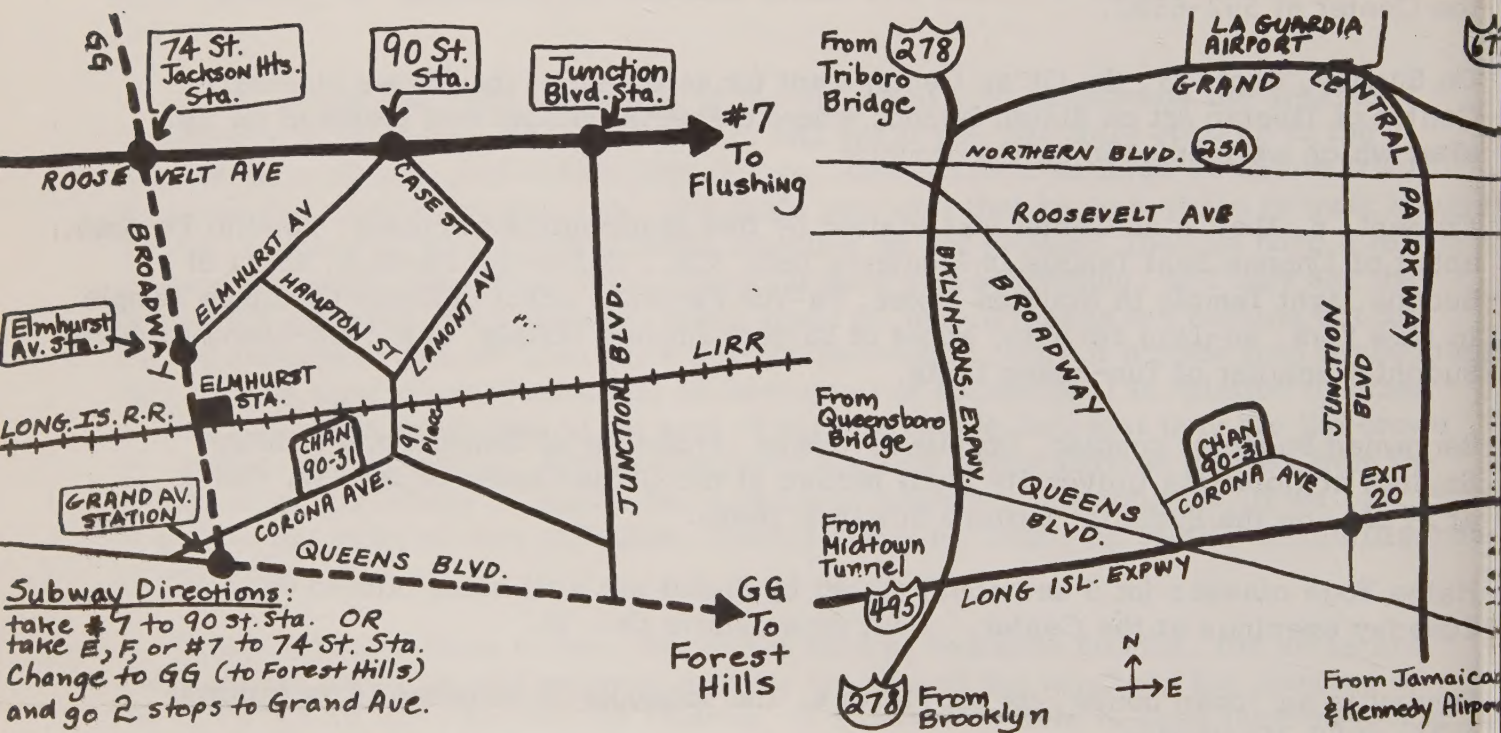
Sunday is an "open house" for all visitors. The schedule of activities is as follows:

- A.M. 9:00 Meditation
- 10 30 Chanting Buddhist Sutras in Chinese (transliterations for non-Chinese provided)
- 11:30 Midday Offering
- 12:00 Vegetarian Lunch (\$1 donation)
- 1:00 Dharma Lecture by Master Sheng-Yen, or, in his absence, discussion on topics related to meditation practice and Buddhism led by Ch'an Center members or invited guest speakers
- 2:30 Meditation activities, guided by Master Sheng-Yen. (free instruction by Ch'an Center staff for newcomers)
- 5:00 Evening Service

Group sittings are also held on Wednesday evenings, 7:30 to 9:15.

The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible.

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.



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